

Bowhunting ethics

Every bowhunter should be very clear on how, why, and where we hunt and be able to defend the morality of bowhunting with sound ecological philosophy. If you cannot do this don't bowhunt - you will bring the activity into disrepute.

Any argument or philosophy must be based on sound foundations otherwise it is indefensible. *The issue of bowhunting is and always will be controversial since it is based on value judgements and personal interpretation within the individuals frame of reference.* There are no absolutes and debates for and against can be lengthy and heated. As hunter / preservationists our frame of reference must be the natural order – otherwise referred to as ecology.

The natural order is organised into trophic levels consisting of producers and consumers. The food pyramid begins with all the species of plants which through photosynthesis, harness sunlight energy and produce food for the primary consumers, the herbivores. These species in turn provide a food source for the various levels of predators and scavengers. All dead plants and animals are food for protozoa, algae, bacteria, insects, and fungi, which reduce the organic material into a state which can once again be taken up by the primary producers. This in very simplistic terms describes the food chain in which we are a part. But where do we fit in?

A herbivore utilises plant material as it's primary source of energy. A predator is usually a carnivore which utilises concentrated protein as primary food source. As humans we fall into both categories eating both plants and meat for sustenance. We are termed omnivores. Because we are creatures that can reason and plan, our role as predator in the system has been profound. What role do carnivores play in the ecosystem? Their primary function is to ensure that herbivore populations don't increase to the point where they destroy their own habitat. A secondary but equally important role is to control the size of their own populations. In the natural order of things, predators are an intrinsic part which play a vital ecological part. Where predators have long been associated with their respective prey the effect has been moderate, neutral or even beneficial in the long term view. Primitive man as a predatorial hunter was a part of the natural system – utilising meat as the need arose. Modern technological man has grown to become a potential super predator and there are ***many inherent dangers associated with technological developments which have swung the delicate balance of the hunter / prey relationship***, which existed for thousands of years, to the point where man now possesses the capacity to be extremely destructive. Being a predator implies not only that you are a meat eater but also that:

- You will utilise animal products to enhance your well being (clothing and shoes for example).
- You will destroy any creature which poses a threat to the safety or well being of yourself or your dependants – the so called survival instinct.

If the assumption is therefore made that predators are part of the natural order, can anyone question therefore the lion's, wild dog's, jackal's, eagle's or man's role to hunt? ***If we deny the part humans have to play we refute the niche of all predators to exist.*** In an ecological sense we can, by pure logic, justify our role as predator – but what must be qualified is our methodology.

The hunted must not be subjected to needless suffering. What is needless suffering? “***We must recognise – realistically – that suffering is an integral feature of life in ecosystems – nature is harsh.***” Herbivores starve, carnivores kill. Animals (and humans for that matter), ecologically speaking, “have neither a right, nor a welfare claim to be spared the pains imposed by natural forces. There is no human duty to eradicate the sufferings of creation because it is part of the plan. ***Environmental ethics has no duty to deny ecology but rather to affirm it. It is not possible to alter nature to suit our value systems.*** The question to be asked is not can they suffer? Or have they rights? Or have they a welfare that claims our benevolence? These questions, although relevant, are overshadowed by a much greater issue.” Has the animal a satisfactory place in the ecosystem? This ***satisfactory fit*** is to be judged collectively on the ***species level***. Eventually the overall effect on the species will be distributed to individuals on average. No species can flourish without flourishing individuals who are representative tokens of the natural kind.” Yet, in the struggle for life, ***for adaptive fit***, many individuals will be losers – their welfare must be sacrificed to predators or competitors in the interest of the species.”

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It may seem unsatisfactory at first that innocent life has to suffer, and we may wish for an ethical principle that protects innocent life. Ought suffering to continue when humans do and can intervene in nature? “That it **ought** not to continue is a tender sentiment, but so remote from the way the world **is** that we must ask ourselves whether this is the way the world ought to be in a tougher, realistic environmental ethic. ***A morally satisfactory fit must be a biologically satisfactory fit. What ought to be is derived from what is.***

Nature is not a moral agent.” There is no good or bad in an ecological sense – only natural. It is our perception or subjective understanding which assigns good or bad to natural events. We say an outbreak of anthrax in which animals die, or a raging bush fire caused by lightning is bad. How can we equate these events with bad. Would the opposite then be good – no natural fires or anthrax? In either case we cannot assign values of good or bad. We must recognise these events as parts of natural cycles. We must recognise nature as a place of satisfactory fitness and use that as a criterion for making moral judgements. This approach must therefore “***endorse a painful good.*** Once we realise that we have no duty / right to reform wild nature, what more? Should we deny ecology or continue to affirm it? If then we accept that we have no specific duty to intervene in the course of natural processes ***it implies that we do not have a strong obligation to reduce the suffering below levels found independently of the human presence. Humans are not bound to inflict no innocent suffering. That is contrary to nature.*** In the clash and interweaving of cycles, forces, and species within an ecosystem, pain goes with the defending and capturing of goods that characterises all life.



” Nothing lives autonomously – everything crowds and competes with neighbouring life. All lives both suffer and cause pain. No predator can live without causing pain.

When humans enter such an environment, they may continue to inflict innocent suffering, particularly in the regimes of securing food, shelter and basic physical comforts.” Human predation on nature, more or less within the natural patterns, cannot be condemned simply because humans are moral agents, not if non-human predation has been accepted as part of the system. Wild animals have no right or welfare claim to have from humans a kinder treatment than from non-human nature.

Meanwhile we ought not to amplify the cruelty in nature. The way to judge whether our action introduces acceptable suffering is to ask if the action is similar to functional baseline suffering in the ecosystemic routines. So far **this is an ethic of non-addition but not of subtraction.**” Yet a well placed arrow which causes a comparatively quick death is in itself an agent of subtraction. Most animals die a much slower death than that caused by a razor sharp broadhead, well aimed. There is nothing immoral about participating in the logic and biology of one’s own ecosystem.

“In this sense, those who sympathise with the pains of animals and wish to eliminate their pains are not biologically sensitive but insensitive. Pain is a pervasive fact of life – not to be wished away by a kindly ethic either in natural systems or in cultural overlap on these systems. **Suffering is a necessary evil – a sad good.**” That humans continue this pattern with their interruptions of the natural order shows no disrespect for animal life; to the contrary it respects natural processes. We follow nature and set norms accordingly.



“The strong ethical rule is this: do not cause inordinate suffering beyond those orders of nature from which animals are taken. Always ask the question – is the human inflicted suffering excessive to natural suffering?”

Ethics do not require us to deny our ecology but rather to affirm it.

“We give animals rights only so far as we see ourselves in them.”

Most people will not hesitate to crush a cockroach underfoot but are horrified when elephant are culled as part of a management program. “Nature is not an arena of good neighbours – ***the goodness there spontaneously arises, in the clash of the struggle to survive and maintain adaptive fit.***”

Eating domestic animals cannot be good and eating wild ones bad. Nothing is more natural than hunting for food. A bullet or sharp broadhead arrow inflict no more pain than do the fangs of a leopard or a lion, but rather less. ***“The fact that a hunter is a moral agent does not prohibit him from occupying a place in the systemic food chain.*** A characteristic injunction in the spontaneous ethic is that meat must not be wasted. Mere killing for sport is not justified but must join it’s ancient function. Most hunters disapprove of wanton, wasteful killing. Killing cannot be senseless, but stands the danger of becoming so if merely recreational.”

A study in the United States showed that 85% approved of hunting for food and about 64% for recreation and meat but with progressively more disapproval of hunting as it is removed from it’s ecological context.



“Keeping the exhilaration of the hunt in the context of ecological predation seems to justify the pastime, because it perpetuates the illusion that it is not mere sport. Since the hunt ends in a meal there is a fractional truth here, although not one hunter in several hundred needs the game in his diet. They eat what they kill – they do not hunt to eat. The old honourable context regained, remains genuinely set in an ecological pyramid, where a predator stalks it’s prey. This is play, but the play re-enacts a deadly serious game – the hunt. Since it remains an ecological event, there is no duty to impose inter-human ethics (Exodus 20:13 “Thou shalt not kill”). Rather “ Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you”(Genesis 9:3). This is the principle motive, although there are further considerations, for and against, With predators gone, some animals overpopulate. Humans may replace predators. Without hunters/wildlife managers, animals will eventually starve if populations exceed the land’s carrying capacity. Sociologically, hunting interrelates with cultural ways of life. On the other hand it can degenerate into a masochistic killing for thrills, covering up inferiority complexes.”

The best case that can be made for bowhunting is that it is not merely recreational, but is a vicarious, therapeutic, character-building, re-creational event where the hunter, who has decided to hunt the hard way, ***must become a student of nature*** if he/she expects to have any success emanating from their hunting endeavours.

The pursuit of bowhunting sublimates the drive for conquest. The hunter is as propelled as the arrow he shoots.



“Death is a “sign of reality” in hunting where “one does not hunt in order to kill – on the contrary one kills in order to have hunted.” In this sense hunting is not sport. It is “a sacrament of the fundamental, mandatory seeking and taking possession of value that characterises an ecosystem and from which no culture ever escapes.”

Is hunting blood lust, covered with some ecological veneer? Or is it an ecological morality that accepts the facts of a world, humans did not make, and have no duty to re-make? Is it hardened hearts versus bleeding hearts?

Or is it taking the world to heart? ***“The ecological ethic, which kills in place, is really more advanced, more harmonious with nature, than the animal rights ethic, which is in utter disharmony with the way the world is made, and kills no animals at all.*** They who go out and kill for fun may have failed to grow up morally. Sometimes those who object to any killing in nature and in human encounter with nature have failed to grow up either biologically or morally.”

“Hunters need to be emersed in the bloodletting. ***The hunter feels not “perfect evil” but “perfect identification” with the tragic drama of creation – the blood sacrifice on which all life is founded which both is and ought to be.*** “In ways that mere watchers of nature can never know, bowhunters know their ecology. It is the acceptance of the good way in which the world was made



” It should not be forgotten that there is a nature to which we are intensely attracted, and the ambiguity towards a nature we need to slay and love, surfaces in the contradictions of the hunt.” The unease with which a good bowhunter inflicts death, affirms this inward struggle. The authentic hunter knows suffering as a sacrament of the way the world is made.

The satisfaction of skill at the hunt must run deep – sometimes flattering vanities – but we cannot always interpret them so. The fact that some men (and women) enjoy skilled hunting, mixed with unease about killing, should be no embarrassment.

Hunting should ***never be economically, socially, or politically driven*** yet the truth of the day is that the survival of many wildlife species is inextricably linked with their economic value. What ethic applies to wildlife utilisation and management? The answer is that ***it must be primarily ecologically driven***. Part of this answer is keeping the species within a satisfactory fit in the ecosystem. Part of the answer depends on the suffering inflicted and what is traded for the suffering. ***Animals must suffer no more, on average, than might have been their lot in wild nature.***

“As these uses of animals pass from the essential through the serious into the merely desirable and finally to the trivial, the ecological pattern rapidly fades and the justification collapses.”

The use of fur to provide warm clothing to ensure survival is close to the natural, and the suffering is justified thereby. The use of fur for status – a leopard skin coat on an actress – is highly artificial. The suffering traded for it is not justifiable by any naturalistic principle.



Commercial wildlife operations are subject to profit pressures, which introduce additional moral hazards. ***The forces that drive capitalism need moral and ecological scrutiny.*** There are abundant rationalisations and temptations to compromise which can result in minimised sensitivities. Commerce often increases callousness. ***Our ethical attitudes towards animal suffering must be consistent with ecology, not distorted by economics.***

In wildlife management however a certain callousness towards life is demanded. One cannot be sentimental about the welfare and sufferings of individual animals in isolation from the limits of an ecosystem.

The baseline concern is for species filling niches in ecosystems for a satisfactory fitness. In wild nature predators and disease provide population control, The nature now encountered is often semi-wild or modified, and if natural predators do not exist, man, within the constraints of wise management of an ecosystem, must and can play the role of the predator. If considerations of carrying capacity can show that culling is in the interest of the species, there is no reason not to kill.

The test really ought to be whether the commerce and management are based on a philosophy that promotes a reverence (respect) for life, even when such life is sacrificed for the ecological good. A bowhunter who kills a wildebeest as part of a culling program can reverence life as much as a Humane Society member who feeds one.



Ethical guidelines for bowhunters:

- ◆ Show respect for the animals you hunt – afford them dignity, even in death.
- ◆ Always use appropriate equipment and sharp broadheads to ensure a quick kill.
- ◆ Be absolutely sure of shot placement. Remember when using the right equipment wounding is not a function of the tools but of the hunter.
- ◆ Shoot within your effective range. Don't attempt risking long or dubious shots. Be guided by ethical considerations and be prepared to pass up a shot if you are not sure about it.
- ◆ Become a student of nature. Know your animals – their anatomy, habits and habitat they frequent.
- ◆ Always expend every effort to follow up on wounded animals, until they are found.
- ◆ Respect the places you hunt – don't litter, use no-trace camping methods. Try, as a rule, to leave the place in a better condition than what you found it.
- ◆ Use adequate equipment.
- ◆ Don't leave arrows lying in the veld. Sharp broadheads are a danger to wild and domestic animals and humans.
- ◆ Respect the rights of property owners.
- ◆ Utilise what you hunt or make it available to people in need.
- ◆ Discourage bad and unethical behaviour by other hunters.
- ◆ Support and respect fellow hunters – the onslaught against hunting is levelled at firearm and bowhunters. All ethical hunters should therefore stand united.

- ◆ Hunt ethically – fair chase.
- ◆ Confine your hunting to areas that are managed on a sound ecological basis and where controlled hunting forms part of the population control program. Research the places you intend hunting on and if your research gives you the impression that the organisation is allowing hunting for other than ecological reasons, make the choice, as a matter of principle, not to hunt there.
- ◆ Don't mix alcohol and hunting. Choose your hunting friends with discretion. To many so called "hunts" in our country are no more than very poor excuses to have a binge.
- ◆ Hunt within the law. Know local game laws and abide by them.
- ◆ As long as you hunt within ecological constraints – make no apology for being a bowhunter.
- ◆ Become a dedicated student of nature.
- ◆ Become skilled in bushcraft.
- ◆ Learn to love the hunt more than the kill. If you have hunted hard and fairly and have come home empty handed you will never be disappointed and it will be a good excuse to go out and try again ...and again...